

**AMERICA'S FAVORITE POEM**

Also by Jason Koo

Poetry

*More Than Mere Light*

*Man on Extremely Small Island*

As Coeditor

*Brooklyn Poets Anthology*

**AMERICA'S FAVORITE POEM**

**JASON KOO**

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*America's Favorite Poem*

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*for Anna Greenberg*

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Just needed time alone with my own thoughts  
Got treasures in my mind but couldn't open up my own vault  
My childlike creativity, purity and honesty  
Is honestly being crowded by these grown thoughts  
Reality is catchin' up with me  
Takin' my inner child, I'm fightin' for it, custody  
With these responsibilities that they entrusted me  
As I look down at my diamond-encrusted piece

—Kanye West



## AMERICAN DREAM

*after Shakespeare 129*

Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.  
What's the point of being ridiculous?  
Over and over and over again, it seems.

Enough's enough, enough to make you scream.  
Well, you don't. You're quiet. Meticulous.  
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.

You browse through dirty thumbnails on a screen  
Then click Clear History, recoil in disgust.  
Over and over and over again, it seems.

This gives new meaning to the phrase *come clean*.  
A silly sully-cycle—you're into this?  
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme?

Not a human being but an in-between,  
There, not there, there and not there, more or less  
Over and over and over again, it seems.

Oh Mister Umpteen, Mixmaster Misqueme,  
What's the point of being ridiculous?  
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.  
Over and over and over again you dream.



## A NATURAL HISTORY OF MY NAME

*after Google*

Today I read that only 2.2%  
out of a million first and last names  
have a higher vowel than consonant ratio,  
and, since 50% of the letters  
in my name are vowels, this means  
I am “extremely well envoweled.”  
I go outside strutting the bulge  
in my name: the trees are wowed  
by my vowels, they only have two e’s,  
which is why they have no leaves  
at this time of year: the snow must submit  
to the scrunch of my boots,  
snow only has one o and I have three,  
even my boots, so tough and rugged,  
clearly dominating the one-o’d  
snow, must bow down to the deity  
of me, with three, never raising  
themselves higher than my feet:

I cross the bridge and it is the same,  
the river cannot keep up  
with me, look at it writhing in the ice,  
so fearsome with its 66.7%  
envowelment but not so  
intimidating to me, because ice,  
if you’ll notice, slides on its c,  
eventually skidding to a stop  
like a hockey player before the puck  
of the e: which in a flick  
disappears: whereas I keep floating out  
on my opening of o’s, the song

of my name is repeated through nature,  
    cuckoos and owls take pleasure  
in perpetuating it, just one koo  
    is never enough for them, koo  
must always come coupling

    through their throats: you can hear  
this song taken up by schoolchildren,  
    I used to hear it all the time,  
I thought kids were taunting me  
    but now I know they were just jealous  
of my o's: they saw these heaped  
    in their bowls of canned  
spaghetti and cereal, but no matter  
    how many spoonfuls they jammed  
in their mouths, no matter how  
    many more muscles they grew  
than me, they never grew any  
    more richly envoweled: this was just  
something you had to be born with,  
    a natural advantage of hailing  
from a family that came from a tiny  
    Pacific peninsula whupped  
by other countries: our name shed  
    contours of consonants  
to slip past detection, shape-shifting  
    into other words like a  
syllable chameleon, from haiku to coup  
    d'état matching colonial culture  
and upheaval, so when I hear Hi Koo

    today followed by a giggle,  
the laugh is not on me but on the oppressors,  
    whose whole poetic tradition  
gets wiped out by my arrival.

## GIANT STEPS

*for Gunny Scarfo*

I'm listening to Tommy Flanagan and thinking of the quality  
That separates great artists from mediocre ones: tenderness, taste, charm,  
gravity, light—  
But are you capable of some mean-ass fucking?  
Tommy Flanagan, I'll admit, I was skeptical when I bought your tribute  
album for John Coltrane,  
Thinking you had some Giant Steps to fill,  
But you, Mraz and Foster just *kill*  
"Mr. P. C.," doing all kinds of nasty things to my cochlea, loosening my head  
at the hinge,  
Saying, Henceforth thou shalt never associate the name Flanagan  
With lovely, tasteful dinner-time ballads,  
The kind you put on when a woman comes over for your prefab middle-  
class cooking—  
I am not an ingredient in your four-course seduction meal,  
I am not a twinkly Oscar Peterson background,  
I am the author here, I will do you and do you and do you until I'm done.  
Point taken, Mr. Flanagan,  
I can scarcely understand how you're getting all this sound out of the piano,  
You're just pounding away at me, what power!  
(Scarcely? Stop saying scarcely!)  
I want this power in an artist: I hate this new breed of poets  
Who hate the word, the idea of power, favoring  
Shriveled, dribbly productions, no chance of offending anybody, no chance  
of not getting tenure,  
And meanwhile, as Mayakovsky says, the tongueless street writhes  
For lack of something to shout or say.  
I went to Times Square for a Poetry Society of America reading,  
Wanting to hear something to match that massive, Moby-Dickian energy,  
To put all that commerce in its place, Sephora, Billabong, MTV,  
To outlava the panoramic magma of ads,

But all I got were cool susurrations, poets barely able  
To muster a look at themselves in the Jumbotron projecting them,  
As if to do so would be egotistical, surely the worst sin in poetry since Keats,  
No one wants to offend Keats! And no, no ego here,  
None of these poets tried to publish or entered this Times Square Alliance/PSA  
contest or built up their bios,  
They were just happy to be here,  
Or not be here, manifesting their Negative Capability and leaving it to the  
people behind them  
To stop and look at themselves in the Panasonic mirror:  
People who'd never seen themselves  
So glorious, laughing and making faces and capturing themselves  
On digital camera, calling up friends and family members on cell phones to  
share their dwindling minutes  
Of fame: one suited man, looking a little like the towering Jay Z  
In the Rocawear billboard above us, anchored himself  
Behind the poets in the center of the Jumbotron, brushing away the gnats of  
their faces  
From his face, the true subject  
Of the true new poem of America, assembling ominously  
Behind the jigsawed pieces the professional poets were gingerly inching together:  
As if he'd found his final home, arriving at total peace  
Within his own vanity, not self-conscious at all about staring at himself for  
an hour,  
And I had to admit, there was something impressive in this,  
The way he so blatantly broadcast his own self-adoration  
Unlike the poets reading, one of whom, my friend, called the people "disgusting,"  
Or me, who wanted to be up there in place of them, thinking I could  
Blow people off the block with my Big Verse,  
Already imagining the poem I would enter in the PSA contest the next year,  
But who after the reading just told everybody nice job  
And went along for the free fancy dinner and stayed in the friend's free fancy  
hotel room,  
Not bursting out of that bullshit, imagining I was better than everyone else  
But acting self-effacing, thinking this would earn me points,  
Not yet capable of the elevation

That could make that crowd go wild with something other  
Than themselves, something Jay Z would've smacked into them in a second:  
I'm in the hall already, on the wall already, I'm a work of art, I'm a Warhol already:  
    yeah, motherfuckers,  
It takes a real ego  
To destroy the sense of ego, something all mean-ass fucking Flanagans understand.

## AMERICA'S FAVORITE POEM

*In this country there is a universal third person,  
the man we all want to be.*

—Don DeLillo

I'm dreaming of myself in the universal third person,  
floating through Target and seeing drawers full of soft white  
Merona cotton tees. Or maybe Calvin Klein, 2<sup>(s)</sup>ist—  
to exist means raising your life to the power of product x.  
Sage green shower poufs. Striped FLOR modular carpet tiles.  
The expenses disappear into far-flung credit card orbits  
where the moons are APRs. Let's order sleek black Chelsea boots

by Hugo Boss, \$298 but excusable after months of browsing  
catatonic in the office on Zappos.com. Brown boots  
with snakelike stitching down the leather upper by Ben Sherman  
and ooh, look, with purchase receive a kickass canvas  
drawstring bag that solves the problem of how to fly  
with a wardrobe that necessitates both brown and black footwear.  
Messenger bag by Manhattan Portage. Watch by Omega.

Okay maybe not Omega. But to be able to fill that supreme  
confidence of Daniel Craig's Bond in *Casino Royale*, to say, when  
asked about the gorgeous timepiece on his wrist, "Rolex?"  
"Omega." The confidence capped by a single branded word.  
Custom-made tux by Brioni. Turnbull & Asser shirt.  
This man walks on shoes built like Jaguars, sports a different watch  
for every occasion. Black Victorinox Swiss Army watch

for bathing on a Brazilian beach in a soft grey Bottega Veneta  
T-shirt (\$220) next to a bronzed, razorbanded siren  
wearing only a string-knotted bikini bottom by Melissa Odabash  
as she arches back over a boulder like the leather strap  
of a watch, flattening her breasts with one arm



and staring off into the oystered, Odysseus-laden horizon.

Classic Cartier with a thin black alligator strap for the October

wedding. He has a box to store his watches, tie bars, cuff links.

The box itself costs as much as the jewelry it contains.

This man has wicked white sneakers designed by Common Projects with nothing on them but the serial no. of the manufacturer.

He wears the sneakers in the summer with fine white pinstripe khakis not by Banana Republic. He has the crotch of his pants tailored to cup his package right. He has a tailor he can trust.

A tailor he need not tell what to do, who makes *suggestions*.

A female tailor with strongly sculpted calves and yoga contour to her shoulders. Who looks fantastic in a business skirt and sleeveless blouse. Who fucks him on a Tuesday-Thursday afternoon lecture-course schedule. In the dressing room, of course. This man does not have skin problems. He sees a dermatologist named Wolfe who takes a single seasoned look

at his dry skin issues and solves them without having to take a small skin sample the size of a fingernail. Who does not prescribe a steroid foam that runs out after a week and only aggravates the problem. This man fucks the PA with the fabulous thighs to punish her for making faulty prescriptions. She knows nothing about dermatology but who cares? As long as he's getting less than lugubrious sex for his copay. This man does not watch *The Notebook*

four times in one day because he's in an emotional coma.

He finds Rachel McAdams soothing, but in the way a nice Chesterfield coat is soothing, one night of the year and no more. She is not the answer to all his life's problems.

He has no "problems." He stays in motion, attacking potential problems like bicycle pedals that propel him forward.

His life does not depend upon the addition of this blender.

## TAKE YOUR TIME

2008. A large circular mirror affixed to the ceiling at an angle rotates slowly on its axis, destabilizing your perception of space.

I'm not seeing this, staring up at the sky  
Of myself, barely noticing the others

Scattered around me, or should I say  
*In* me, happy to be free to look at myself

In public without pause, without self-  
Consciousness, without having to act like I

Am actually considering buying a mirror  
As I have done in the mirror aisle at Target:

Impossible to judge how you really look  
Within the climate control of your own home,

So how nice to be able to study myself  
In such institutional relief, PS1 vacuum-

Sealing the vanity out of my experience  
And making it culturally pristine, stamped

With the Ólafur Elíasson imprimatur, a name  
I'm pronouncing in all its permutations

In my head so I can drop it authoritatively  
To friends, who hopefully won't correct me:

I check how closely I match the construction  
I drew up, that sunny, relaxed Italian look

I was going for with this new white linen shirt,  
These khakis, which earlier, at the MoMA,

In a narrower mirror installation, had looked  
Too trim, but now, against the floor, projected

With such Sistine eminence, drape perfectly  
Over my body, making me want to lie on

This floor forever—or long enough to net  
A cool profile photo—basking in my Vitruvian

Ascension: I wonder if the artist meant this  
As a joke, knowing we'd take this time

To “destabilize our perception of space”  
By adoring ourselves and excusing it as “art”:

Meanwhile we're all flopping on the floor  
Preening and taking pictures of ourselves,

Part of a larger, smarter installation, a diorama  
On narcissism, on view to anyone passing

In the hall strong enough to resist the temptation  
To join us: but no one's passing, everyone's

Coming in and looking up, no one wants to be  
Left out of looking up, though this keeps us

Flattened on the floor, the mirror hovering  
Like a UFO, allowing us to take our time

Taking our lives, not even needing to attack us,  
Just letting us grow docile out of vanity.

## **GQ CORRESPONDENCE**

Ass of the past is something nice to think about  
Strolling down an autumn street in a nasty two-button tweed  
Finger your argyle sweater to point out the fine  
Complement you make to the pattern of falling leaves  
The maple leaf is the best piece of autumn of the past  
50 years and serves as an excellent emergency pocket square  
We suggest the Paul Smith maple leaf square for \$495  
Or the BR Monogram for \$75 or just pick up a leaf  
Ass is accrued by properly tending to your belt buckle  
Which should create a picture frame for the waist  
Never make your crotch the Axis of Cheeseball  
As we are fond of calling the style of Kim Jong Il  
Calvin Klein is responsible for the most revolutionary underwear ads  
Of the past 50 years just as Marky Mark is responsible for the most fitting  
Book dedication: "I wanna dedicate this book to my dick"

## FOR EVERY ATOM BELONGING TO ME

Sure, now you can walk, hold in your hand  
a spoon, a ball, a book; bite into a carrot,  
nicking the tip cleanly into your mouth;  
piss drunk into a urinal, shifting like penguins  
waddling through huge blue districts of ice;  
swear at your mother, God, a football team;  
swagger with self, the center of a sphere,  
needing no help, bold-molten on your own.

But once you were nothing. All you ate was milk.  
You spent your days wriggling on your back,  
your head so heavy it pinned you to the floor.  
Your mother picked you up, held you, helped you,  
you can't imagine how much she helped you,  
how much tenderness buoyed you from the start.

## MODEL MINORITY

I was thinking on the subway yesterday and thinking I think this fairly  
Frequently, *Fubhbck* these people...

That's just a terrible tie.

Those two mayonnaised over that whole swath of bench where four people  
could fit,

Or six slim Asians.

I make myself into as tight an Asian as possible in crowds  
As a courtesy to other people—

It's the model minority in me, you might say,  
Coolly, while enjoying your extra space.

People move on me like a magnet: I'll be walking down the street  
With a clear path in front of me

When someone ahead to my left swerves into my space.

Once in a hurry to Penn Station I tried to move past a young kid with my  
roller bag

And he *kicked* the bag, sending it into the stomach  
Of a woman walking towards us.

Of course I apologized to the woman, who looked at me  
As if it were my fault,

Then ran after the kid, after first gently repositioning  
The wheels of my bag on the pavement,

Of course I didn't "run," I walked briskly in a straight line wheeling  
My bag behind me,

And when I caught up to the kid I walked alongside him and said, That was  
not cool, sir.

I have no idea where that "sir" came from.

I might as well have said, That was a lovely ball, an excellent first touch.

The kid just looked me over and said, Fuck you, you fucking Chinese—  
And stopped, thinking that was insult enough.

It's funny,

When I'm feeling sorry for myself  
After something like this, my default comfort food is Chinese.

Not "good" or "real" Chinese,  
But fucking Chinese, the General Tso's Chicken I've had

Photoclumped from state to state, the Chicken Lo Mein  
Flaplocked in its warm white cardboard carton,

The Garlic Chicken with Rice I know by now

Should be renamed Garlic Broccoli Carrots Peas Onions Green Peppers  
Mushrooms Baby Corn & Chicken with Rice,

So minor a role does the chicken play in this dish.

Menus should indicate it comes in two volumes:  
Vol. 1 for dinner, Vol. 2 microwaved for lunch the next day.

A curious feeling I have

Sitting down for Vol. 2 of General Tso's Chicken, how removed I am

Yet somehow *in* those mutilated morsels, blasted beyond recognition

Yet somehow more recognizable for that, not even  
Not even real Chinese food, just as I'm not even

Not even fucking Chinese, as I said to that kid, or thought I said, or thought  
to that kid

After he kicked my bag and left me to contemplate

Serious violence only while waiting in line later for the bus with my girlfriend,

Who sympathized at first but decided I was being unpleasant, I could tell,  
The more I mowed

Over the story, the more incredulous I got at what the kid had done.

Who is this whose grief bears such an emphasis?

I was not playing the role she liked, the role I'm happy

To step into late at night when I find myself  
Walking behind a woman alone on a deserted street

And I become aware she's becoming aware

Of me behind her, I'm moving in a straight line and she's not so of course  
I'm within a few feet of her within seconds

Making me threatening, I could be anybody, some madman wanting

To kick something into her stomach, I soften  
My steps so she won't have to hear them but this makes me even more threatening



So finally I move past her without looking and let her see

I'm just a harmless Asian dude, me smiling, I can almost feel myself

Patting this guy on the back.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Named one of the “100 Most Influential People in Brooklyn Culture” by *Brooklyn Magazine*, Jason Koo is the author of the poetry collections *More Than Mere Light*, *America’s Favorite Poem* and *Man on Extremely Small Island*. Coeditor of the *Brooklyn Poets Anthology*, he has published his poetry and prose in the *American Scholar*, *Missouri Review*, *Village Voice* and *Yale Review*, among other places, and won fellowships for his work from the National Endowment for the Arts, Vermont Studio Center and New York State Writers Institute. An associate teaching professor of English at Quinnipiac University, Koo is the founder and executive director of Brooklyn Poets and creator of the Bridge ([poetsbridge.org](http://poetsbridge.org)). He lives in Brooklyn.